We Fall

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/22316317.

Rating:	Mature
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Hannibal (TV)
Relationship:	Will Graham/Hannibal Lecter
Characters:	Will Graham, Hannibal Lecter, Chiyoh (Hannibal)
Additional Tags:	Possessive Hannibal Lecter, Inspired by Art, in collaboration with, artistlin8, Fluff, Angst, Will Graham Knows, Chiyoh gives him the shovel talk, Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence, Dark Will Graham, Fluff and Angst, Coffee date
Language:	English
Series:	Part 3 of Seasoned to Perfection
Stats:	Published: 2020-01-19 Words: 8,605 Chapters: 1/1

We Fall

by LunaStories

Summary

In the brisk cold of Fall, Will recovers from his encephalitis and wavers between his sense of justice and his feelings for Hannibal. When he finds incriminating evidence on the Ripper, he is visited by a woman who seems to know Hannibal as well as he does, and he makes a choice.

Notes

I meant to have this out within the Fall season but I got food poisoning xD So here it is! A few weeks late but hopefully still good. It was a real struggle trying to get this fic out you guys, every time I tried something would happen or I would get sick xD This fic was super fun to write and as usual a million thanks to Lin who is not only an awesome artist but a true inspiration!

If you're new here please read the first two of the series! Though you probably don't need them to understand this fic, I highly recommend reading those first.

This fic was beta-ed by the ever awesome blue_posey. Thanks, my friend, for your help I appreciate it <3

Also a special shout out to Dragon who is currently staying up with me till 2 am as I edited this like a madman. (It's so late ya'll I'm slowly going insane and I've posted 2 hannigram things today so ahHHHHH)

See the end of the work for more notes

The nights were getting longer.

Will leaned back against the hospital bed, propped up by a lumpy pillow and head turned to the side so he could stare out the window listlessly. He could hear the hustle and bustle of the hospital, but over the beeps of machinery, the wail of wind buffeting the leaves outside pierced his safe bubble.

He glanced at the clock on his bedside table. It was only 4:32 pm and already the world was hazy, flushed with pinks and reds as the sun set. From here, he couldn't see the sunset directly, but the way the world quieted was enough for him to feel the night creeping closer.

"Will."

Will looked up, smile dim but genuine as he took in Hannibal's form at the entryway of his hospital room. The shadows stayed where they were, and compared with the natural lighting of Will's room, the brightly lit hallway bathed Hannibal in a glow. It was somewhat of a relief, being free of the constant twisting shadows and the caress of the Wendigo's breath on the back of his neck.

"Hannibal, you didn't have to come so early."

"I wanted to," Hannibal stepped further into the room and carefully pushed the door until it was left slightly ajar, most of the light shuttered away. "I can't imagine you would enjoy the hospital food."

Will shrugged, lips quirking up as he let out a brusque laugh and set up his table, opening it up so that it bracketed his legs and formed a nice tray for him to eat on. "I'm not too picky about what I eat."

In practiced movements, Hannibal leaned over and placed the food he'd brought in containers, and set out the cutlery. He glanced at Will from under his lashes, something admonishing in his gaze. "I care." Once he'd set up the food with his usual flourish and to his satisfaction, Hannibal placed his bag down on a chair and took the one next to Will's bed.

He leaned back, hands folded neatly in his lap as he smiled at Will, regal and possessive in a way that made Will's skin crawl.

"You care about what?" Will asked, a little wary as he picked up a spoon and tasted the chicken soup Hannibal had brought him. Though to call it that was probably doing it a disservice. There were enough ingredients in the soup for a full meal.

"I care about what you put into your body."

Will froze, the movement sudden enough that a drop of soup on his spoon spilled back into the container. He continued a moment later, taking small sips of the broth while keeping his eyes on the window. He barely noticed the long shadows cast by the tree outside, his other hand twisted into his blankets. He wondered if the encephalitis would have shown him something more, something he should be afraid of in this moment.

“Is it because I’m yours now?”

He turned his head just in time to see a flash of pleasure in Hannibal’s eyes. Will knew he’d taken Hannibal by surprise, even if the man didn’t show it too obviously. It was in the way his lips thinned, as if he was trying to suppress a smile, as if Will was a pet that had done something amusing.

“We are friends, Will. Is it not uncommon to worry for the ones we care for?”

“Is that what we are? Friends?” Will glanced down at the carefully crafted soup and the fish and rice dish Hannibal had made for him. It was simple and familiar, and he knew that it was because Hannibal was trying to create a form of comfort food for him. “You sure are affectionate with your friends, Doctor Lecter.”

“Will,” Hannibal licked his lips, a slight hesitance in his touch as he reached a hand out to clasp Will’s. “You were not in your right mind, and it is clear to me now that I can not hold you responsible for your decisions while ill. I won’t blame you if the encephalitis contributed to your receptiveness to my advances. We can continue as friends.”

Will turned his hand over until it held Hannibal’s, their fingers tangled together. He stared at the way they intertwined and wondered when Hannibal’s fangs and claws would finally pierce his skin and draw blood. He held on tighter.

He glanced up. There wasn’t a smile on his face, but he didn’t think the choice he had to make was a laughing matter. “Of course I want you.”

Hannibal’s eyes crinkled with pleasure, and Will stared, mouth slightly open as he took in the genuine happiness that shone through. The encephalitis was gone, but he could still see the cracks in Hannibal’s mask, only this time, there was no hazy fever blinding his troubled mind.

Suddenly, there was a flash of lightning that illuminated the room and threw light into their darkened corner, the ominous crash of thunder following soon after. Neither of them made a move to turn on the light, comfortable with the darkness.

“It’s raining.” Hannibal commented mildly, his gaze focused on the way the shadows of rain seemed to trace Will’s features like teardrops.

“So it is,” Will replied, unclasping their hands so he could finish his soup. He took a moment to take in the rumble of thunder, much like the growl of a monster. He held the spoon a little tighter and stared at his fingernails. If he looked close enough, he could almost imagine them growing longer, sharp and deadly.

Predator becomes prey.

He smiled into his soup, and when he met Hannibal’s eyes, the man flashed him a grin full of teeth.

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They said it was lucky Hannibal had called when he did, that Will's encephalitis could have potentially left him permanently damaged or dead. Will didn't know if he would call it lucky, more that it was orchestrated and that the path he took to get there wasn't as clear as he'd envisioned.

He'd never thought of Hannibal as his savior. If anything, he was a companion of sorts, maybe even someone who guided him when he needed it. He walked beside Will down his darkest paths and never shied away from Will's less than moral tendencies. That should have been the first indication among many that something wasn't quite right. He could blame the encephalitis for leaving him blind, but Will knew it was because he wasn't ready for the truth.

He wondered, now that he *saw* Hannibal for what he was, if he was ready.

Will followed the leaf-strewn path, his boots steady on the cobbled stone as the crunch of leaves shattered the near silent winds. His hands were tucked into his coat pockets, the silky grey scarf wrapped around his neck a present from Hannibal. He pressed his cold face into the soft material and breathed in. Hannibal's scent still clung to it, his cologne bringing to mind old books and warm offices. Most would find it comforting but it represented who Hannibal was on the surface, a scent to mask the hunger underneath.

Deeper into the fabric, he picked up hints of blood and the musk of a carnivore. He smiled, hidden by the scarf as he dropped down onto the park bench and accepted the cup of coffee that was handed to him. The cold of the wooden bench seeped in, even through his thicker pants. It was a sensation that juxtaposed the heat seeping from the drink into his gloved hands. A shiver racked through him as he took a grateful sip of the hot drink, eyes closing and a happy hum falling free as he felt his body warm up.

He looked up at the cloudy skies rather than the man next to him, though he felt those sharp eyes on him just the same.

"Coffee date in the park? Seems juvenile for you."

"You've been in the hospital for almost two months, Will. I was hoping you would welcome the reprieve from white walls and the smell of antiseptic."

Will glanced at Hannibal, taking in the soft smile on his face as he sipped at his own drink. It was probably some blend of tea with a pretentious and very long name. Will liked to stick with his black coffee.

Hannibal looked warm and cozy, his expensive wool coat a pleasant light brown and his green patterned scarf covering what was certainly a suit and tie ensemble underneath. Even when he wasn't playing therapist, he liked to dress up. He was much like a peacock that way.

"What are you thinking about?"

Will coughed lightly as he pressed his lips to his coffee cup, wiping the slight smirk he'd had on his face. "You, mostly."

Hannibal radiated smugness at that, and Will had to suppress a laugh. Definitely a peacock. He sobered a little when he wondered if that was a side effect of Hannibal's more… murderous hobbies, or if it was the cause of them. The need for attention. But then again, Hannibal regarded himself above most people, it was unlikely he would make his choices based on those he didn't care for.

His grip tightened on his cup, body wound with tension as he hunched over and let the steam from the coffee waft over his face. It was a warm puff of steam, occasionally cut by a chilly breeze. There were few people out today, most taking refuge inside and away from the bitter unforgiving cold. He thought he could hear a couple playing with their dog a few yards away, but he couldn't be sure. It seemed too innocent a sound and he knew that the time he shared with Hannibal was anything but. He wondered if their brand of darkness was infectious, if others would succumb to it through prolonged exposure.

He couldn't blame Hannibal for his current self, the foundations had been laid long before they met. But some days he couldn't help but wonder if Hannibal had taken a look at the core of Will and decided '*yes, that looks like a good place to renovate and rebuild*'. No, Hannibal didn't create Will, but he sure as hell changed him. It showed in the way that Will still hadn't told Jack what he suspected. He could excuse it as not wanting to rock the boat while he lacked evidence, but he knew that his word was taken almost as law when it came to Jack. If he'd said he suspected Hannibal, Jack wouldn't have hesitated to figure out a way to investigate him.

When he looked at Hannibal again, the monster stared back with curious eyes. He could almost see the antlers of the Wendigo in his golden hair, his skin cracking and revealing white eyes underneath. He blinked and shook himself out of his stupor, all too aware that he couldn't risk piquing Hannibal's suspicions. It was best to fake ignorance until he could figure out what he wanted and what his next move would be.

"You seem distracted."

Will smiled, lips stretched thin. "Now that I'm out of the hospital Jack's been hounding me for answers. There's a few new cases that have popped up that he needs my help on, but mostly he's been worried about the Ripper."

As expected, the name made Hannibal perk up, his eyes lit with just a hint of interest. If Will hadn't known to expect it, he wouldn't have seen it. It was certainly a miracle that Hannibal had stayed under the radar for so long, he was unexpectedly emotional and often he projected those emotions for his benefit. Sometimes, however, he slipped up and it made him easy to read. Though Will couldn't be sure if that was because of his empathy or if he just shared a special bond with Hannibal. He understood him more than most, and that was a scary thought, but it made him feel less alone.

They were both monsters in their own ways, just different breeds.

"Oh?" Hannibal's voice was light and careless, with a hint of worry, just enough to encourage the topic but hide his own interest in it. "And how is the Ripper case going?"

Will sighed. "Not well. The lack of activity on that front is making Jack nervous."

Will startled when a ball stopped against the side of his shoe and he picked it up automatically. There was a sharp bark, and he lifted his arm and threw the ball as far as it would go into the trees. A kid, about college aged it looked like, yelled out his thanks and shot off after his dog as they chased the ball.

He slapped his hands together a few times, dusting off the dirt that had transferred to his gloves from the ball. When he was done, he glanced over at Hannibal and frowned at the look on his face. It was almost tender, a warm regard that made Will heat up and the back of his neck prickle. He wasn't used to Hannibal showing him such soft emotions. Sure, Hannibal had pretended well enough when they'd first started becoming friends, but more and more Will was realizing that Hannibal seemed to genuinely like him.

It was intimidating as much as it was flattering.

"What is it?" Will muttered, trying and failing to meet Hannibal's eyes.

"You are beautiful when you let your guard down."

He blinked once before turning his gaze to the trees, staring unseeing at the fog that was slowly drifting in around them. His words were slow and careful when he finally spoke. "You like that I let my guard down around you, even when I shouldn't."

He felt himself tense, that last part of his comment a quiet absent-minded murmur. He knew Hannibal heard it all the same because he shifted, just enough to press closer to Will's side, a line of warmth.

"You know better than to let others in." It was both an observation and a question, and Will didn't hesitate to answer back.

"Letting someone in would require them to be separate from me. You and I," Will paused, his tongue darting out to lick his wind-chapped lips as he traced a finger over the rim of his cup. "We are not separate but we also aren't one and the same. Conjoined, maybe."

"Separate enough to still be unpredictable, but close enough to be enjoyable."

"Yeah," Will breathed out, a tired smile on his lips as he felt the caress of Hannibal's hand smooth down his back and settle there, hot and heavy in its familiarity. He'd watched nature documentaries, back when it was something to drown out the nightmares. He'd seen predators hold down their prey with a paw to their neck, he'd seen them press down as a way to comfort and show affection. Whichever one Hannibal was presenting him with, he leaned into the touch all the same. "Does it scare you?"

Hannibal was silent, long enough that Will risked a glance at him. His eyes were focused on Will's neck, and he wondered what the predator, this monster next to him was thinking. Maybe he was stalking, pacing in increasingly small circles around Will until he could move in for the kill. Will tilted his head, bared his neck and welcomed it.

"Fear is necessary for our continued survival. It tells us when something is wrong, that there is reason for wariness," Hannibal's lips pulled up, eyes crinkling as he met Will's gaze. "I

don't believe fear is a proper description of what I feel." The *'for you'* part was left unsaid, but Will heard it all the same.

"Then what do you feel?"

"Curiosity mostly. A sense of belonging. The cold press of a mirror fogging up and reflecting who I think should be me, but is instead you."

A chill ran up Will's spine and his breath caught in his throat. He kept the eye contact, too fascinated to look away. Those eyes, sometimes an inviting dark brown, other times lit up with red blood lust, they stared back at him now and all he saw was Hannibal and the Ripper intertwined in that gaze. Their intentions were unclear even as they slithered up to him and whispered words of praise and temptation into his ear.

Eat. The words seemed to say. And when he gave in and bit into the blood red heart, it wasn't an apple of wisdom but rather the choking squish of flesh and gushing blood. *Clever boy.*

He looked away before he could drown.

He couldn't let himself get caught up in Hannibal's games. This wasn't a situation where he could come out the other side unscathed, already the encephalitis had given him more than his fair share of nightmares.

He threw back his cup of coffee, gulping the now long cold bitter liquid down before letting out a breath and standing up. He looked down at Hannibal, his smile tight but polite as he focused his eyes on the neat collar of Hannibal's coat.

"I need to review some case files. Thanks for inviting me." Will hesitated for just a moment before giving in and cupping Hannibal's cheek, pressing a light kiss to his mouth. Hannibal had always seemed like he would feel cold, but his lips were surprisingly warm. Will closed his eyes and breathed in his scent, mouth dropping open slightly as if he could taste Hannibal if he lingered long enough. He pulled away before he could be tempted to stay.

Hannibal was staring up at him, cheeks a little pink from the cold as he smiled. "I will see you in a few days, Will."

"You're going on that trip, right?" Will feigned surprise. He knew full well Hannibal had told him he was going, but it wouldn't do to show too much interest in it.

"Yes," Hannibal's lips thinned into a white press of lips, a flash of displeasure peeking through. "This patient of mine is very particular, and insisted on keeping their appointments with me, despite their current out of country status."

"And they wouldn't accept a video call?"

Hannibal shot Will a sardonic look, voice dry. "They believe that the FBI are constantly monitoring all video calls and refused to even attempt it."

Will let out a laugh, trying not to think too hard on the fact that there may be some truth to Hannibal's extremely paranoid patient. The FBI were certainly a shady bunch. "It's kind of

you to go all the way to France for them."

"It is not entirely altruistic," Hannibal admitted. He reached up to wrap his fingers around Will's gloved hand. "I miss France, and I had hoped to take you with me."

"Not this time, sorry," Will frowned, glancing down at their clasped hands as he sighed. "You know how Jack is. I'm practically on call 24/7 until the Ripper shows himself again."

When he looked back up he had to stifle a laugh. The jut of Hannibal's lips was very much a pout, and he resisted the urge to reach up and soften it with his thumb or maybe his mouth. "I'll go with you next time."

"I will take your word for it," Hannibal replied, softly, before he brought up Will's hand and pressed his lips against the back of it. He knew that it was unlikely, but he thought he felt Hannibal's warm breath through his glove.

He flushed, and barely resisted the urge to snatch his hand away.

"Hannibal."

The name was not a hiss, but very nearly was, and perhaps his embarrassment shone through because Hannibal pulled back after a second, his eyes twinkling with mischief.

"So prickly, you would think you'd never been shown affection."

Will looked away and this time he freed his hand with a tug, though more gently than he would have if it was anyone else but Hannibal who had pulled such a stunt in broad daylight. "Not everyone is able to handle your brand of charm."

"It is fortunate then, that you are the only one subjected to it." Hannibal's words were dry, but Will definitely sensed amusement in them.

He scowled. "Yeah well, tone it down."

"Whatever you wish, dear Will."

He tried not to let those words get to him, but he knew he was unsuccessful when Hannibal's eyes darted to his ears, no doubt taking in his blush. He pulled his scarf higher until it practically wrapped around the bottom half of his face. "I really do need to go."

"Of course," Hannibal got up and dusted himself off, carefully balancing his cup in one hand as he tilted his head towards the path. "I'll walk you to your car."

"You don't need to."

"I want to."

And well, Will knew it was rather futile to try preventing Hannibal from doing what he wanted. The walk was companionable and comfortably silent, both lost in thought. When Hannibal left Will at his car, he breathed out, trying to get his bearings. Will lifted his hand,

the one Hannibal had pressed a kiss to, and brushed his lips against the same spot. He closed his eyes tightly and his next breath was a trembly inhale, then exhale.

He could still taste Hannibal on his lips.

He straightened and opened his car door, sliding into the seat and closing himself inside the slightly warmer air of the car. Outside, it had started to rain, and the drops slowly grew on his windshield until they beat out a steady rhythm. He clasped both hands on the steering wheel, his eyes focused on the outside world even as he tried to settle.

This was nothing. This was just Hannibal playing with his food. If he told himself that enough times, maybe he'd believe it.

He shuddered, the autumn chill finally creeping in. In Hannibal's presence he always felt flush and warmed to the core, but without him, cold reality set in.

He leaned his head forward until he could rest his forehead on his hands.

"What am I doing?" Will whispered.

The wind howled in answer, and Will hated that he actually missed the Ravenstag. He even missed the Wendigo, though he understood now that it had just been Hannibal without his person suit. But maybe that was the most damning part of it all, that he felt so god damn lonely without his monsters to walk beside him and tell him he was being *clever*.

He sighed. It didn't matter. He may not know what he wanted just yet, but Hannibal would be out of the country for at least a week. Just enough time for him to find the evidence he needed. And then…

Well, he would know what to do once he got there.

Mind settled and focused, he got out of the parking lot and drove home through the pouring rain.

xxxxxx

"Will."

"Jack." Will greeted him with a sigh as he clasped the phone between his shoulder and ear, both hands occupied as he ladled the chicken meat into his dog's food bowls. Their tails were wagging madly, but they were well trained enough that they didn't immediately rush in and overwhelm Will. "I told you I would call you if I had any new information on the Ripper."

"And I told you that we don't have that kind of time. Waiting just leaves him time to find his last sounder. Who knows when he'll kill again after that? We can't let him slip out of our hands."

Will set down the pot and ladle onto the counter with a harsh clang, a hand coming up to pinch the bridge of his nose as he frowned. "There's nothing I can do right now, you know that."

“Well have you tried walking through the scene again? Or reviewed the reports?”

“Jack,” his breath was harsh through his nose and his irritation was clear in his voice, “I live about ten minutes walking distance from the second crime scene. I am intimately aware of how close it is and I assure you I’ve done everything I can.”

“Will-“

He cut off Jack’s protest, too tired to deal with this bullshit today. Not when he had plans. “I’ll call you back once I figure anything else out. I’m still recovering from the encephalitis.”

That seemed to shut Jack right up, and it was with a few more half-hearted demands and well wishes that Will was finally able to safely hang up. He resisted the urge to toss the phone at the nearest wall, and instead got dressed and grabbed his duffle bag.

He’d given Jack half-truths. There was certainly something he could do right now, and he’d been hesitant to do it for most of the day. Jack’s phone call had given him just enough to realize he had to, even if there was a chance he was wrong, he still needed to *know*.

He locked up the house and stared out into the field. It was night now, the stars spread out in a blanket above him and the fog stretching thick enough to make it look like Will was on a boat, adrift at sea. He used to walk out into the field and look back at his house, floating in the mist. It made him feel safe, secluded. Now that he was on the boat looking out, he wasn’t sure if it was as comforting. What would he find out there, in the dark unknown waters? He inhaled, and clutched the duffle bag a little tighter.

Moist skin, wet rain. The scent of mulch and earth, the taste of ozone and metal on his tongue. The silence only enhanced by the light drizzle of rain that settled on his skin in broken patterns.

He’d always liked Fall, the in-between season of heat and cold. Summer and Winter. Summer was passion while Winter was death. And Fall? Fall was when things laid down to die. Rebirth, growth and sacrifice.

He hoped that he didn’t need to sacrifice anything tonight.

He looked up at the moon, bright and looming, and closed his eyes.

xxxxxx

It wasn’t easy breaking into Hannibal’s house and it was a nerve-racking experience. He’d have liked to say he’d never done this before, but that would be a lie. He’d had a rough life as a child, and when his father left him alone and starving for too many days, he’d resorted to breaking into houses and feeding himself that way. As a child it had been easy to slip in and out unnoticed. As an adult, it was much more conspicuous.

Luckily, being a frequent guest at Hannibal’s house meant he knew about the less used side door which was hidden by some bushes and out of the public eye. It was a tense few

moments before he heard the lock click open. With a sigh of relief he tucked his kit back into his duffle bag and cautiously pushed the door open.

The house was dark, and through the wide windows, Will could see the occasional flash of lightning. It was a dry day today, no rain, but thunder could still be heard and felt. The study looked different, ominous and clinical almost, without the lit fireplace. He looked away from it and closed the door, locking it carefully. His hands were encased in polyester gloves, a standard brand that was mass produced. Working closely with forensics had taught him a thing or two about avoiding being incriminated.

He rifled through his bag for a second before producing a flashlight and clicking it on. It wouldn't be wise to turn on the lights and alert the neighbors. No doubt in a rich neighborhood like this, even the slightest anomaly would alarm them.

He started at the desk first, trying to remember how the papers were organized so he could replace them exactly as they were once he was done snooping. It revealed nothing to him except that Hannibal had a tendency to sketch on his patient log, likely out of boredom as he listened to his clients drone on about their woes. It made Will want to laugh, knowing that even the great and powerful Hannibal Lecter wasn't immune from the occasional boredom induced doodle.

He moved on from there quickly, sweeping his hands under and over furniture to check for hidden compartments. He huffed when he came up empty. He stood there for a long minute, trying to decide on his next move. He'd been so sure that Hannibal would keep anything incriminating in the study.

A little lost, he wandered into the hallways, idly checking each room as his mind and heart raced. He kept his ears open for any suspicious noises, and every rumble of thunder and eerie creak of the house left his heart pounding from nerves. The house had felt so warm and welcoming when Hannibal was here, but without his presence it just seemed lifeless.

Another flash of thunder, and Will winced as he blinked a few times to get rid of the white spots in his vision from the sudden flash. He was in the kitchen and at first his search was half-hearted at best (he seriously doubted Hannibal would keep murderous things in the kitchen when he valued it so much), but he opened the fridge regardless and checked the shelves.

There were packs of meat in the fridge, tightly vacuum sealed and clinically placed. Will gave them a glance before turning to shut the door then froze almost comically. He turned back to the meat and stared.

There was a hair, stringy and long. He wouldn't have noticed it if not for the way it stood out on the white backdrop of the fridge and the packages.

See, usually that wouldn't alarm Will, but he knew that hair. He'd seen it floating, inky black and gently flowing within the waters of the second Ripper victim. Slowly, his hand reached out and picked up the package.

They were all organs.

His fingers were numb and he knew his breathing was loud over the crash of thunder, as he counted each packet and categorized the organs in his mind. These were the organs the Ripper's second sounder had been missing.

He wondered distantly how he should feel about this. Was it supposed to be disgust? Or maybe he should cry and scream for the horror of such an act. Cannibalism was frowned upon, after all.

But all he felt was a puzzle clicking into place, and a brief flash of giddy glee at understanding and seeing another piece of Hannibal. He placed the packets back into the fridge with a grim press of lips and steady fingers.

In a weird way it made sense. Hannibal wouldn't see himself as a cannibal. That required him to see others as equal to himself. No, this was merely a predator taking what was rightfully his.

He closed the fridge and checked the space closely. He ended up at the wine closet but Will knew there wasn't anything in there but the wine racks. Still, it couldn't hurt to check.

Another flash of lightning as he opened the door and stepped inside. It was musty here, the wood well-kept but its age was revealed through its woodsy scent of decay. A rumble of thunder, and Will felt the vibrations through the wooden flooring and into his shoes. He was about to leave when he noticed something was unusual with the way the vibrations had felt. They had been too strong, not muffled by the wooden flooring as they were supposed to.

Will knelt down and laid his hands on the floor, feeling around until he traced a pattern that didn't match the rest of the boards. He followed it and his breath hitched when he realized it was in the shape of a square.

A trap door then.

Will dug his nails into the edges and tugged until the door moved, just enough to get his hands under it. He pushed it up and stared down at the darkness beneath.

Taking a deep breath, he brought up his flashlight and pointed it down. All it showed was a set of stairs. He grabbed his pistol from the duffle bag and shoved the bag so that half of it hung over the hole. It would hopefully hold the door open a crack when he went down there, he needed to be sure he could get up and out again.

With a muttered curse he carefully stepped into the belly of the beast.

The stairs lead into what seemed to be an open room. Even his flashlight had a hard time illuminating anything enough for him to get a good sense of the place, and he decided that since this was a basement area, he could certainly turn on the lights without alarming a neighbor. His hands smacked against the cold walls until he encountered a switch. He flicked it on and promptly squinted his eyes shut as lights flickered on one by one.

When his eyes adjusted, he took in the room. It looked almost like a surgery room, but one look at the blood drain under the reclining chair in the center with restraints installed told him

all he needed to know.

This was Doctor Lecter, the Ripper, at his finest. This place, clean and tidy, plastic hanging from the ceilings was the lion's den.

His eyes were blank, mouth pressed into a thin line as he slowly walked a circuit around the room, taking in the cabinets full of sharp implements and the machinery that he'd seen before in butcher's shops. He stopped at one of the drawers, eyeing it.

No matter how well Hannibal cleaned his instruments, there was bound to be residue DNA on it. It would be so easy to take a small scalpel and slip it into his bag. Knowing Hannibal it would only take him a day (once he was back in town) before he realized it was gone, but it would still give Will plenty of time to report back to Jack.

His hand hovered over the neatly lined up scalpels and he lightly traced the smooth metal.

In this place, he almost felt safe. He couldn't hear the sound of thunder, and he couldn't see the blinding flashes of light. Nature was cut off from him, but in this place nature had taken its course more than once. Death, over and over again, Life in the way Hannibal took their organs and used their meat as sustenance.

Will closed his eyes and took a deep breath before palming the scalpel and sliding it carefully into his duffle bag.

There was a certain beauty to what Hannibal did, the almost innocently casual way he played with life and death. Like a child left with too many toys and with a proclivity to break what he played with.

Will turned away from the drawer and carefully pushed it shut. He gave the room another cursory glance before heading upstairs. He'd gotten what he came here for.

He left quickly after that, and didn't notice the shadow watching him from a house down.

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The days passed in a blur. Every minute, the Wendigo seemed to creep closer, the noose tightening and the scratch of claws an eerie echo in the night.

Will let out a harsh shuddering breath as he loosened his scarf, his neck damp with perspiration. The world continued around him, ignorant of the way he felt watched and judged. People meandered down the street, kids shrieking and laughing as they darted from their parent's exasperated hands. The afternoon sun was nowhere to be seen, hidden by dark clouds and hints of fog.

His eyes idly skimmed the streets, his glasses keeping his gaze obscured as he subtly tried to catch a glimpse of who was following him. Ever since the night he'd left Hannibal's house, souvenir in hand, he'd felt the distinct sense that he was being watched. It wasn't stalking, not in the predatory sense of the word, because there was a cold curiosity rather than malevolent intent from the person following him.

It wasn't a coincidence that this person had latched onto him after his visit to Hannibal's. They had to have a connection with Hannibal, maybe even to The Ripper. Will raised his head up, letting out a puff of breath, a white cloud drifting from his mouth as he took the opportunity to dart his eyes to the side.

And there, reflected in the shop's windows was a woman. She was dressed sharply, coat and scarf dark in the greyscale world that late Fall had drawn them into. Her expression was just as severe, hair braided in an elaborate manner and pinned up to reveal a deceptively delicate face. If it wasn't for her sharp eyes, he would have mistaken her for prey.

Will let his head fall back down, his hands deep in his pockets as he ran his thumb across his phone. Should he call Jack? As quickly as that thought had appeared, he dismissed it. If she was connected to Hannibal, there was a chance that her appearance could give him more information. If Jack got a hold of her first… Will clenched his fists before loosening them, letting his phone fall back into the confines of his coat pocket.

Will closed his eyes, steeling himself before continuing on.

He didn't know who he was trying to protect, was it himself? Or was it Hannibal?

It sure as hell wasn't the general populace, or he would have turned Hannibal in long before. He let out a brusque laugh, hand coming up to swipe at his bangs, the wind blowing his hair into a curly mess despite his best efforts.

An abandoned and dirty book lay in his path, the pages fluttering in the wind as if struggling to get up, to continue on.

His mind strayed, drawn into a memory of a book he'd read, when they had said he was too unstable to be an FBI agent. A particular quote in it had stood out to him, and he'd clung to it, trying to understand why exactly he'd made it this far only to be told he was unsuitable. Was it his mind? His true nature? He didn't fucking know, but the words had dug their claws into his heart and soul.

Maybe he had known that it was inevitable even back then.

Will sighed, letting the mist dissipate as he watched the woman watching him, both acutely aware of the other through the sea of people around them.

He whispered, grin wide and a touch too sharp.

Is it better to out-monster the monster or to be quietly devoured?

He knew she wouldn't hear him, but he chose to believe the shudder that ran through her was a sudden awareness that he was indeed a monster in his own right.

He faced forward again, a grim smile on his face as he trudged on. Let her come then, whether she was sent by Hannibal or had her own agenda, he would not go quietly into the night.

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Will was in a dark space, the emptiness around him so all-consuming that he wasn't sure if he even had a physical body. It should have been oppressive, maybe even terrifying, but all he felt was a thrill of anticipation.

Ahead of him was a tree looming and full of life, but as he approached, drifting ever closer, the tree shuddered and the leaves started wilting. They changed as he watched, the once soft fluttering sound of leaves now a harsher, dryer rasp. They fell, one by one, until the base of the tree was littered in a blanket of yellow-brown.

A gust of wind blew the dry leaves into the air, swirling up and up until they disappeared. Will covered his eyes, squinting against the debris. When the air cleared, Hannibal was standing at the base of the tree facing him. His skin was bare, almost glowing in the still darkness surrounding them.

Hannibal. He tried to speak, but found that he couldn't break the quiet.

Hannibal smiled, a knowing look in his eyes as he raised a finger and lightly tapped it against his lips.

Silence.

There was a rustle, a soft whispering slither as a snake wound itself up the lower branches that framed Hannibal's head. It was a pure white, the mosaic of scales only broken by a line of light golden-brown. Hannibal tilted his head back slowly, eyes closed and that ever present smile on his face as he let out a muted sigh.

A bird alighted on the branch across from the snake, head jerking and searching the surroundings for any sign of danger, yet ignorant to the threat right behind it. The tree rustled, branches shaking, as if trying to warn the bird. It paused in that moment, its red-orange chest of feathers heaving with every quick breath, its grey tipped wings ruffling up then settling.

Will tried to yell out as the snake slithered ever closer, its tongue flicking out and tasting the warm scent of prey. The bird froze for a split second, and Hannibal opened his eyes, a sharp glint in them as the snake struck out and wound itself around the bird.

It squeezed and choked, heedless of the bird's helpless thrashing as it suffocated. The desperate rustling sounds settled down, and the snake seemed to writhe before stretching out. Instead of a prey's corpse, Will saw another snake slowly raise its head up.

It opened its eyes, its body a subtle grey, a line of red-orange scales down the length of it helping it blend into the tree. The once-bird opened its mouth, tongue flicking out to scent the air as it carefully and languidly slithered down and over Hannibal's shoulders. It settled there as if it belonged, the length of it coiling and stretching until it was looped loosely around Hannibal's neck.

Hannibal didn't seem bothered by this, in fact, he looked almost content. He raised a hand up and the first snake wound itself around his arm, pale against his tan flesh.

Will stepped closer, barely registering the fact that he could now move, as he approached Hannibal. Hannibal opened his mouth, fanged and split in a wide grin as he reached his arm out to Will. The white snake sat there waiting.

It was an offering, a transformation.

Prey becomes predator.

Will let himself Fall as he grasped Hannibal's arm. He closed his eyes, and the last thing he felt was the biting cold of scales in the quiet stillness of their shared darkness.

When he smiled, it was just as unhinged as he was.

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The cold touch on his hands wasn't scales, but metal.

His eyes flew open as his hand tightened its grip on the scalpel in his palm, his arm lashing out with it and cutting through clothes and skin. There was a muffled grunt of pain as the intruder stumbled back, their lithe form illuminated by the moonlight outside as they recovered quickly and leveled a shotgun at Will's face.

He froze, blinking as they stared at each other. The shiny glint of blood on her arm was obvious even in the dark room, her coat torn from his defensive maneuver. It was the woman that had been following him.

He grimaced, a hand coming up to wipe away the sweat on his face as he sat up in his bed, shivering from the cold. Her shotgun followed him as he moved.

"Who are you? Why have you been following me?"

His hand tightened on the scalpel and her eyes darted down to it, lips pulled into a thin line, though her aim did not waver.

"Who I am is of no consequence to you. I only need what you have."

"And why should I give it to you?"

"You do not know who you are playing with, you may lose more than you are willing to give."

Will scowled. He knew that, but she seemed to treat him like he was ignorant of Hannibal's proclivities, that he thought himself immune to Hannibal's penchant for death. He was all too aware of the consequences of this game he played with Hannibal.

"You seem to know him well, yet you are still protecting him. What is there to gain from befriending a monster?" Will heard a quiet whine, and both of their attention turned to the doorway where Winston sat. Will let out a sharp whistle and a click of his tongue, and the dog barked once before going back into the puppy pile on the rug in front of the fireplace.

The woman was staring at him when he met her gaze again, and this time she seemed softer. "Sometimes, we don't choose our family."

Will raised a brow but decided to extend an olive branch, despite the gun she had on him. "I'm sure you know who I am, but what's your name?"

She paused for a second before slowly lowering her gun. Will tilted his head towards the sofa chair he had next to the window and she carefully lowered herself onto it, gun next to her and in easy reach. “My name is Chiyoh.”

“And whose side are you on?”

“I’m on the side where Hannibal survives with the least amount of casualties.”

Will smiled, his lips pulled into a bitter grimace. “Then we’re on the same side.”

She regarded him with sharp eyes before sitting up straighter, stern. “Hannibal doesn’t show mercy. He treats those he favors with a certain kind of gentleness, but in the end we are all chess pieces to him.”

Will knew what she was really saying and it was a warning. Perhaps she was trying to spare him the pain. Just because Will wanted Hannibal safe, it didn’t mean that would hold true for Will. Sooner or later, knowing Hannibal would lead to his death or worse.

“And what was your task? What was the demon you had to slay?”

How did Hannibal guide you, change you? Will wanted to ask, and he saw in her haunted look that it hadn’t been a pleasant experience.

“I broke free of my chains through my own choices,” her voice wavered for a moment before she continued on. “My loyalty was greater than my fear.”

Will scoffed, even as his heart pounded and he felt a crawling sense of foreboding travel down his spine. “Your loyalty to Hannibal is exactly what you should fear.”

“But I’m still alive, aren’t I?”

“That’s no consolation. Hannibal treats us like toys, he’s playing with his food.” The words weren’t said as biting as he would have wanted, his own yearning breaking through.

Chiyoh picked up on it because she smiled, a sad thing that seemed too tired and jaded for one so young. “Maybe so, but you know deep down that that’s not true for you. You’re… different to him.”

Will looked away, throat pulled taut with emotion as he tightened his hand on the scalpel, the now skin-warm metal an anchor for his drifting emotions. “I can’t risk my life on that.”

“But you will, regardless. This game you play is dangerous.” Chiyoh’s tone was firm, as if it was to be expected. “Love, it is what breaks people. To love, is to grow and change together, to strive to be better. But what do you do when the person you love brings out the worst in you?”

“Then all you can do is survive.” Will whispered, closing his eyes as he felt exhaustion sweep over him. The worst parts of Hannibal were what appealed to him the most, and those parts of him spoke to Will. It made him feel less alone. There was no pure good or evil, but they were two predators in a world filled with prey. There were so many things he felt for

Hannibal, and every single emotion was stronger than anything he'd felt in his entire life. They had an understanding that transcended morals and the limitations the world had placed on them.

"Yet you are not surviving," Chiyoh murmured, voice soft and a hint of reproach in it. "You are thriving."

Will didn't refute her, knowing full well that surrounded by Hannibal's darkness and manipulations he'd never felt more alive.

"Have you heard of the phrase 'koi no yokan'?"

Will shook his head, taking in the way she stared at him, as if trying to figure out a puzzle.

"There is no exact translation for it, but its meaning holds true for your relationship with Hannibal. It is the feeling one has, when they met someone for the first time and know that they will inevitably fall in love. It sounds romantic, does it not?" Chiyoh's lips turned up in a humorless smile, eyes flinty. "But it is the inevitable that you should be afraid of. It is a premonition, a soul-deep understanding that there is no escape from love."

Will's smile was brittle, a wan grin and the confidence of an animal lead to the slaughter. "Then fighting against this inevitability would just be tasteless, wouldn't it?"

It was almost like Hannibal had spoken for him, and there was a flash of something on Chiyoh's face then. Will's grin grew sharper. He scented fear, the hint of prey and blood in the waters.

She bared her teeth, a final attempt at saving him from drowning himself, or perhaps it was a lack of understanding of what he shared with Hannibal that made her so wary. "You believe yourself to be the exception. Tell me, how do you plan to survive Hannibal?"

"You must be more beautiful to him alive, than in death. Appeal to his sense of aesthetics, and come out the other side forged by blood."

There was a long silence as Chiyoh watched him, taking in every twitch and hitched breath, witnessing his *becoming* as he changed. She stood and picked up her shotgun, careful and regal, as if not to startle the predator in the room.

"I know now why Hannibal covets you, Will Graham. You are not the broken shell of a man I believed you to be, and it will be by your choice and bloodied hands that will change Hannibal."

Will pressed his lips together to hide his victorious snarl, his fingers twirling the scalpel in his fingers as he watched her shoulder her gun and walk towards the door. "You're not going to take the scalpel? It's a pretty damning piece of evidence against Hannibal."

She paused as she opened the door, the wind blowing into the room and ruffling her coat with its buffeting waves. She tilted her head, eyes towards the outside but attention turned inwards.

“This is your becoming, you’ve earned the right to make the choice.”

“And what are my options?” Will called out as she left, leaving nothing but the cold in her wake. He leaned back against his bed, heart steady even after the tense encounter.

He stared out the window, watching her make her way through the mud lit only by the dim moonlight. She turned back just once, and her eyes were inscrutable as he stared at her. Her mouth moved, just enough that Will could almost pretend he heard her whisper in the stillness.

Will you become the betrayer, or the betrayed?

End Notes

Thanks so much for reading! A few notes of interest:

Koi no yokan is a Japanese phrase and when I saw what it meant I really thought it matched Hannigram's relationship so much so I added it in.

The dream sequence where the Hannibal!Snake changes the bird to basically Will!Snake is based off of a chinese folklore of the same theme, where a bird goddess was changed against her will by a snake demon and forced to become his consort. In this case though, Will is more than willing lol.

Edit: Something else I forgot to mention (now that I am more coherent lmao) the 'quietly devoured' monster quote Will remembers is from the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche and his book Beyond Good and Evil. It was very fitting both for Hannigram in general and this fic's theme in particular. Though Fall is my favorite season, I leaned more heavily into the predator/prey dynamic and themes rather than the seasonal ones because Lin had said that was what they were portraying in their art so I incorporated it. In particular, this fic is the switch in power dynamics, where Hannibal changes from predator to prey in the first section (due to Will's newfound knowledge), and then eventually Will meets Hannibal in the middle and they both are predators in their own rights.

If you guys enjoyed the fic please do let me know! Your feedback will definitely motivate me to finish the Winter piece faster haha <3 That will be the last one of the series ;-; I'm both excited and nervous for it to end!

If you'd like, please check out the art and fic masterpost on Tumblr as well as on Twitter. Please do give Lin some reblogs and retweets, they work really hard on their art!

You can find my tumblr here. Feel free to drop by and say hi! I'm also active on Twitter and it'll be 99% Hannigram/Hannibal stuff so please check me out there! I'd love to get to know some of you. I'll likely post little snippets of what I'm working on next as well.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!